TESOL JOURNAL, Summer 1993

Junior Historians: Doing Oral History with ESL and Bilingual Students

Irma M. Olmedo

Note: Every attempt has been made to maintain the integrity of the printed text. In some cases, figures and tables have been reconstructed within the constraints of the electronic environment.

Teaching social studies to bilingual or ESL students in the United States can create both linguistic and cultural difficulties. Because social studies textbooks and materials use abstract vocabulary, teachers need to develop comprehensible examples for students with limited English skills. In addition, the historical and geographical referents may not be part of the cultural background of the students. Although teachers of native English speakers in the United States can make certain assumptions about their students' basic knowledge of U S. geography and history, such assumptions cannot he made for the student who is new to the country or whose cultural background varies from that of the mainstream. In such classrooms, teachers have to develop information retrieval skills and a knowledge base to make the curriculum content accessible.

Motivating these students to want to study U.S. history and geography may also be challenging. Teachers of history decry a widespread lack of interest in their subject on the part of' all students, native English speaking or not. This indifference may in part be explained by the fact that too often history is taught as memorization of isolated facts, rather than an exploration of concepts and events placed in their proper context. Others (e.g., Sitton Mehaffy & Davis 1983) recognize that it is difficult for many of our students to identify with important historical events because they are unable to make connections between what happened to people ages ago and what they experience in their own lives.

Too often history is taught as memorization of isolated facts, rather than an exploration of concepts and events placed in their proper context.

Sitton et al. (1983), for example write that:

> Some highly respected historians are even arguing that we should begin to rethink and rewrite American history upwards from the organizational units of families and local communities rather than downward from a strictly nationalistic perspective. (p. 7)

ESL and bilingual students educated in the United States also share with native English speaking students an inadequate foundation in geography and history. Controversies between Eurocentric and Afrocentric

curriculum advocates have refocused public attention on the teaching of social studies. Given the changing demographics of U.S society, there is a clear need for a multicentric curriculum. In such an approach, teachers can help students see history from many different points of view, including the conflicting points of view of the participants. For example, students can surely learn to understand the conquest of the Americas from both the European perspective and that of the Native Americans.

Many teachers are already rethinking the way the social studies is taught in order to find ways to make the subject more interesting and comprehensible to students (Kyvig & Marty, 1982; Marchart, 1979. .Mehaffy, 1984; Sears, 1990). One approach helps students understand that history is filled with stories. By employing oral history approaches with bilingual and ESL students, teachers can "bring history home" and help students understand that history is not just something that happened long ago and now lives only in their textbooks (Sitton et al. 1983), but rather that they and their communities are players on the historical stage.

Using oral history With students is not new. National History Day (in June; the date changes) advocates often encourage students to undertake such projects.

They see that their families have something worth sharing with mainstream culture. They are able to recognize the common characteristics that they share with other ethnic groups as well as the uniqueness of their own family and ethnic group.

There are also some national projects, such as Foxfire, that ask students to elicit oral histories from their families or communities (Sitton et al., 1989).

RATIONALE FOR ORAL HISTORY APPROACHES

Strengthening Concept Learning

All good pedagogy is based on the assumption that new concepts should be built on what the student already knows. As educators in the social studies continue to urge teachers to focus on concepts rather than on isolated facts, teachers need to explore new ways of teaching these concepts and making them as relevant as possible to students (National Council for the Social Studies Task Force on Scope and Sequence, 1989). Oral history can strengthen the learning of new concepts by creating a context for studying the colonial period in U.S. history, students can explore the reasons for which their own families came to the United States and became part of a community. Concepts such as religious persecution, tyranny of autocratic rulers and rights and responsibilities of self-governance can become more comprehensible if examples can be developed from the students' own experiences. Oral history approaches provide teachers with opportunities to develop parallels between the history of the United States and their community.

Broadening the Knowledge Base

Oral history approaches can broaden the knowledge base of a social studies curriculum. Because much of history is written from the point of view of the winners rather than the losers, it is not surprising that the

experiences of many of the ethnic groups in our classrooms are not found in many textbooks. However, such experiences can be documented from the raw historical material offered by students and their families.

Many ESL and bilingual students live near or with grandparents and even great grandparents Such students may not appreciate what a wealth of historical experience their own relatives have and how it relates to historical events they study in school. In reviewing a videotape of an oral history interview of an elderly Puerto Rican man, for example, several teens wondered aloud how this gentleman with so little education knew so much about World War II. They had not understood that World War II had occurred while the man was a teenager and that many of his peers had served in the military during the war. By using examples from the students' family histories, then, we can introduce social studies concepts in a way that is relevant and meaningful for our students.

Strengthening Language Skills

Oral history is an ideal way to focus on developing oral skills because students have to use such skills during interviews and, later, when presenting the information to their classmates. Literacy skills can also be enhanced when students translate or transcribe oral interviews into English or abstract from them what is most valuable for sharing with others in the class. They need to identify main ideas, supporting details, and critical examples as they go about developing their presentations.

Involving Parents as Partners

One of the most difficult tasks of teaching with ESL or bilingual students is identifying ways to involve parents in their children's' education.

Other strategies can be developed by teachers willing to recognize that students not only learn from the teacher but also from each other.

Having students participate in oral history projects in which they have to interview a parent grandparent. or other relative or member of the community is a natural way of validating their family's experience, to capitalize on the wealth of knowledge that members of the community may possess.

Enhancing Students' Self-Concept

As we validate the life experiences of families, we also enhance the self-concept of students. They see that their families have something worth sharing with mainstream culture. They are able to recognize the common characteristics that they share with other ethnic groups as well as the uniqueness of their own family and ethnic group.

Learning Cooperatively

Oral history lessons provide excellent opportunities to employ cooperative learning approaches‹useful both linguistically and culturally. From a linguistic viewpoint, they allow students to practice their spoken

English in a smaller, less risk-laden environment, simultaneously maximizing the opportunities for verbal interaction because four or five students can be speaking at the same time in different groups.

Cooperative learning groups can also be valuable from a cultural perspective. Research shows that some cultural groups function more effectively in a cooperative rather than competitive environment (Kagan. 1986; Philips 1983). For students from those groups. opportunities for such classroom cooperation can enhance their learning and participation.

Cooperative learning can be organized in a variety of ways. The process of conducting, transcribing, and presenting the interview results can be divided up among group members. Students from the same ethnic group can work together to supplement family history with librarybased research. They can work together to present the information as a group rather than as individuals and thereby focus on the commonalities and diversity that exist in the group itself. Cooperative groups can be formed with students from different backgrounds, with group members having to identify similarities and differences in groups based on the oral history interviews. Other strategies can be developed by teachers willing to recognize that students not only learn from the teacher but also from each other.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Identify Social Studies Concepts

Initially, you will need to decide which social studies concepts to teach, perhaps by reviewing the curriculum guide or course of study, or the scope and sequence chart in school textbooks to see which concepts or topics may profit from an oral history approach. If you do not teach social studies, you may want to consult with your school's social studies teachers to see how your bilingual and ESL classrooms can reinforce the concepts taught in their classrooms.

Some typical social studies concepts may include: dependence and interdependence; interaction of human beings and their environment; resource development and use; scarcity; migration; acculturation; the impact of economic or technological changes on societies; issues of war causes and results; the meaning of culture rights and concepts such as the effect of climate and natural resources on economic structures and the way of life of the people (National Council for the Social Studies Task Force 1989).

Prepare an Interview Guide

You may want to prepare a questionnaire or interview guide that students can use to interview family members, neighbors, or someone in their ethnic community. Eliciting sample questions for the interviews from the students is an effective practical opening activity. You and your class will want to develop questions that allow the interviewees to discuss aspects of growing up in their own cultures It may he necessary initially to limit he number and scope of the questions. Because the questions are to be used for interview purposes, students get practice in using conversational language in a natural style.

Students need to understand that the history of the present is being created right now by people like themselves.

Translate the Guide

Translate or have students translate the questions into their native languages. This approach highlights the value of knowing two languages. The more fluent bilingual students often become role models for the class because of their ability to function in both languages. However students who are limited in English can also make a valuable contribution by writing the foreign language versions.

Record and Practice Interviews

Train the students to use tape recorders and take notes and have them start the project by interviewing each other. Students may want to do the interviewing in the native language and then have someone translate the gist of what was said. Students can also practice asking or answering the questions in English m order to practice their oral skills. These practice interviews can even provide opportunities for role playing, with students pretending that they are grandparents recounting their childhood memories. Students can also be encouraged to take photographs of their interviewee to further enhance the authenticity of their task.

Invite Guest Speakers

Invite a person from the community to be interviewed by the class. The class can work together on the transcription of the tape or on the summary of what was learned from the interview. The process of transcribing oral speech can also be an excellent ESL exercise because students need to learn to understand natural language, with its false starts, interruptions, and repetitions as well as a variety of accents and ways of speaking.

Select an interviewee

Have the students identify a person they can interview. If they select the most elderly person in their family or neighborhood and ask that person to discuss memories about grandparents, the interview can go back as far as five or six generations! If some students are unable to find a relative to interview, someone else in their ethnic or religious community--who can be identified through community organizations, churches, or other institutions--can provide an alternative. This option is important for students who may be adopted or who have lost relatives in any of the wars that made them refugees.

Assign Tasks

Assign students or small groups responsibility for interviewing, transcribing, or summarizing the tape, and sharing what has been learned with the class.

Select Themes

An effective follow-up to these activities is to develop a list of themes from the students' interviews and then use them along with examples from the textbook to reinforce the concepts of the social studies curriculum: Examples from the oral history interviews will be much more accessible to the students because they discovered them themselves.

Compare and Contrast Experiences

Have students compare and contrast the experiences of their interviewees. One way to develop this skill is to have students read historical biographies or novels of people in different times focusing on similarities and differences between their interviewees and historical characters. In this way the oral history projects take on an interdisciplinary dimension incorporating both social studies and language arts.
An oral history project with bilingual and ESL students can have many valuable outskills in both languages because both are needed to carry out the project and present it to the class. Writing skills are also improved because students need to transcribe the oral tapes and summarize what is important, selecting the main idea and supporting details Students can improve their knowledge of historical concepts because they can relate these concepts to real information from their own families or community. They learn to analyze raw data, abstract what is important or relevant, begin to understand patterns, compare and contrast their experiences with those of others, and carry out research with reference materials to broaden their understanding of events referred to in the interviews. Their self concept is enhanced as they understand that the experiences of their families and ethnic communities have a legitimate place in the school curriculum.

Students need to understand that the history of the present is being created right now by people like themselves. One hundred years from now children will be learning about the various ethnic groups that settled in the United States, how they lived, what they experienced, and how the United States was changed as a result of their presence. Students need to understand that history is a dynamic process and that the diversity of their backgrounds is an asset. They can become junior historians of their own communities and ethnic groups at the same time that they develop and improve their English language and literacy skills.

References

Kagan, S. (1986). Cooperative learning and sociocultural factors in schooling. In: Beyond language: Social and cultural factors in schooling language minority students (pp. 231298). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University.

Kyvig, D., & Marty, M. (1982). Nearby history: Exploring the past around you. Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History.

Marchart, N. C. (1979). Doing oral history in the elementary grades. Social Education, 43, 479-480.

Mehaffy, G. L. (1984). Oral history in elementary classrooms. Social Education, 48, 470-472.

National Council for the Social Studies Task Force on Scope and Sequence. (1989, October). In search of a scope and sequence for social studies. Social Education, 53, pp. 376-387.

Philips, S. U. (1983). The invisible culture. Research on Teaching Monograph Series. New York: Longman.

Sears, A. (1990). Enriching social studies with interviews. The History and Social Science Teacher, 25 (2), 67-71.

Sitton, T. Mehaffy, G., & Davis, O. L. (1983). Oral history: A guide for teachers and others Austin: University of Texas Press.

Wigginton, E. (1989, Feb.) Foxfire grows up. Harvard Educational Review, 59 (1). 24-49.

Author

Irma M. Olmedo is Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has been a teacher, bilingual education program director and curriculum administrator. Her research interests include sociolinguistics and education, second language learning, and bilingualism.

Sample Interviews

The following interviews are excerpted from Bridges: An Oral History Anthology, 1991, a Cleveland Public Schools project sponsored by the Writing Collaborative of the Cleveland Education Fund.

After we left Vietnam, we couldn't fly straight to the United states. We had to stay in a refugee camp at a plateau in the Philippines for six to 8 months. We learned English and American culture before our ressetlement in the United States... We were told to go into an office where an officer at the ICMC (International Catholic Migration Commission) would arrange place for us to stay. There were about 15,000 to 20,000 refugees in the camp.

Han, Vietnam

During 1975, the Vietnamese Communists took over Vietnam. Hai had to go to re-education for two years. During the two years his wife was left home alone. The two years were very long. So many Vietnamese were being controlled by the Viet Cong. Hai was one of the lucky ones. Lots of them had to spend more time m re-education.

Hai, Vietnam

I was born in 1933 in a big, nice city near the Black Sea--Odessa. During my childhood I was not lucky because from 1941-1945 I lived in Siberia during the big war. When I came to Siberia, we didn't have a house. We made a kind of tent out of our clothing and slept with our clothes on. It was snowing. Near our home was a factory for the manufacture of bombs. My mother had to work in this factory. All of the women worked there because the men were at war. If my mother didn't work, the government wouldn't give her food (the little bread that she got.) She had to do very hard work.

Americans sent presents to Russia. I had a dress from America and some food. It was very, very good. Americans helped. They sent many, many presents to the Russian People. Maybe it was 1943, 1944.

Many Puerto Ricans were leaving the Island for New York after the Second World War in the 40s. I left in 1945. I had been seamstress, working in a factory of women for a Puerto Rican employer. My employer encouraged me when he told me that I could earn more in NY and raise my children in a better environment, where they could learn English and many other things... There was work in New York. People said that one could get jobs there.

Goyita, Puerto Rico*

*Based on Olmedo's own oral history research; not connected with the Bridges project.

Sophia, Ukraine

This project affected me as a teacher in that I became even more excited about the lives and stories of my students. I had the excuse and opportunity to work with them, writing stories down and making taped interviews. I learned that working across age groups, cultures, and parts of town was possible and desirable. It was an enjoyable experience It was also at times tearful as I shared in the memories of these courageous people.

In thinking about my own stories about oral history and family sagas, so many things came to mind. Growing up biculturally was no easy thing. There were conflicts of values and lifestyles between the two cultures. What was difficult for me to deal with as a child became a precious gift to me as an adult. To be able to live in two worlds, two cultures, and have an understanding and appreciation of both helped me be more sensitive to the people I work with. For that I'm very thankful. The Bridges Project allowed me to explore my history and listen to the stories I hadn't paid as much attention to as a child. I feel that the project awakened a desire to know more about myself, my culture, and the people around me.

Karin (a teacher), United States

Return to NCBE's TESOL Page
